

24

THE MAVERICK SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Relationships between administrators and stakeholders are an element of institutional climate—that is, they influence the way people feel about districts and schools (Hanson, 2003). For example, the associations often determine if and how school officials respond to political pressures or threats. Because power is typically distributed broadly among internal and external pressure groups embracing different values, every important policy or administrative decision is likely to be criticized or even overtly opposed by one or more factions (Wirt & Kirst, 2009).

Relationships among administrators in a district and between administrators and the school board are especially consequential. Harmony within and between these groups usually discourages counterproductive political behavior and strengthens the institution's ability to manage such behavior when it cannot be avoided (Carr, 2003). This is because positive relationships are an asset that helps administrators to weather political attacks, especially those stemming from philosophical dissonance and other forms of conflict inevitable in all organizations (Hanson, 2003).

When administrators have poor relationships, especially with each other and with school board members, they end up expending a great deal of their time and energy on interpersonal conflict (Vail, 2001). As a result, important responsibilities, such as instructional leadership, are neglected and employees and other stakeholders are more likely to believe that the district's leadership team is in disarray. Interpreting dissonance as a symptom of political vulnerability, pressure groups typically intensify their efforts to influence policy decisions through a show of force (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007).

Given the political nature of public education, principals and other administrators are affected by the rapport their superintendent has with the school board. This association, however, is usually complex and dynamic; a superintendent-board relationship is actually a composite of multiple relationships between the superintendent and individual board members. Moreover, school boards are more likely to be factional rather than pluralistic (Shibles, Rallis, & Deck, 2001), and factionalism fosters political behavior. As an example, superintendents working with politically-divided school boards almost always are pressured to align with a faction (Kowalski, 2006), making it difficult for them to establish credibility and trust with all board members (Blumberg, 1985).

This case is about a school board member angered by a high school football coach's decision concerning a star athlete—a decision perceived to be detrimental to the board member's grandson. Seeking revenge, the board member, acting alone and surreptitiously, takes his grievance to the state high school athletic association hoping that the organization will sanction the coach and high school. Although other board members disapprove of his behavior and view it as being unethical, they are unwilling to chastise him. Instead, they urge the superintendent to issue

an informal reprimand on their behalf. In summary, the case study raises questions about the relationship between a superintendent and school board members.

Key Areas for Reflection

1. Superintendent and school board member relationships
2. School board member ethical behavior
3. Conflict resolution
4. Scope of superintendent's legitimate authority
5. Superintendent's responsibility to adjudicate intrusions into administration

THE CASE

The School District and The School Board

The Richmond County School District, covering 420 square miles of predominantly rural land and including two high schools, five middle schools, and 11 elementary schools, enrolls approximately 8,000 students. The seven school board members are elected to office, each from a designated geographic area in the county. By occupation, the board members include an accountant, an attorney, a farmer, a nurse, a pharmacist, a real estate broker, and a retired business executive. Elmer Hobson, the farmer, is the longest-serving board member, having been in office for 11 years.

In the last 2 years, the superintendent has made about 75 major recommendations to the school board, many of them policy-related. Although 74 were approved by the school board, Mr. Hobson voted against 41; in 39 instances, he cast the only negative vote. Representing two rural townships, he has been fiercely independent and outspoken, yet he describes his personal relationships with other board members and the superintendent as being "congenial."

The Superintendent

Matthew Karman replaced Elton Simcox as superintendent 3 years ago. His predecessor had served for 5 years but support among board members was never unanimous. The school board was divided into two factions—one with four members supporting Superintendent Simcox and one with three members committed to dismissing him. During his fourth year in office, Simcox lost two of his supporters as a result of a school board election. Their replacements aligned with the faction not supporting the superintendent; shortly after they took office, the board voted five to two to dismiss Superintendent Simcox.

Since Superintendent Karman's arrival, another board member who previously supported Simcox left office (he chose not to seek re-election). In the wake of his departure, Mr. Hobson became a maverick without board-member allies. Faced with this reality, he became more congenial but no less compromising—and, he continuously reminded Superintendent Karman that he still felt that Superintendent Simcox should have remained superintendent.

Knowing the history of the relationships between his predecessor and the school board, Superintendent Karman purposefully sought to maintain good relationships with all seven board members. He especially tried to reach out to Mr. Hobson, occasionally inviting him to lunch and visiting him at his farm. Based on the superintendent's last performance evaluation, one could

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After receiving his second annual performance evaluation, the board voted unanimously to renew Karman's employment contract for another 3 years. Surprising many observers, Hobson, who had voted against employing Karman initially, voted in favor of the motion to renew the superintendent's contract. Responding to a reporter's question regarding his apparent change of mind, Hobson commented, "He's not been as bad as I thought he would be. But I'm keeping an eye on him".

Trouble Emerges

Superintendent Karman was driving down a lonely country road as the winds swirled across barren cornfields partially covered by snow. He was delivering school board packets for an upcoming meeting. Although it was only mid-November, the chilling temperatures made it feel more like January. The fields were dotted with corn stalks cut about 2 inches above the ground; they looked like wooden spikes someone had arranged to discourage trespassers.

When Karman pulled into the driveway beside a large three-story house, a German shepherd barking alongside his car greeted him. The noise summoned John Mosure from the house. John, a retired vice president of a marketing research firm, had lived in Richmond County until the time that he graduated from high school. Having returned 4 years ago, he purchased a 12-acre property on which he and his wife pursued their hobby, gardening. In Superintendent Karman's mind, John was an ideal school board member. After being elected to the board 2 years earlier, he quickly won the respect of the other board members and was elected president after having been on the board for just 1 year.

The superintendent and board president worked well together and most everyone knew that they had become friends. They and their wives were often seen together publicly.

As the two men sat at the kitchen table, Superintendent Karman handed the board packet to Mr. Mosure and then said, "John, I hope you've got some time to talk to me today. I want to discuss a potentially messy issue, and it may take a while to go through the details."

John told him to proceed.

"Two days ago, Bob Daily [principal of North Richmond County High School] received a telephone call from Joe Sutton, the associate commissioner of the state high school athletic association. Joe also happens to be Bob's friend; the two were principals in the same school district about 15 years ago. Joe asked Bob if he knew Elmer Hobson."

There was a moment of silence and then John said, "Oh, no!"

John and other board members rarely agreed with Elmer, and they considered him to be a ticking time bomb. When John was first elected to the school board, Elmer attempted to forge a political alliance with him since both represented rural townships. The two men quickly discovered that their philosophies and priorities were dissimilar as exhibited by the opposing votes they cast on many major issues.

The superintendent continued with his story. "Bob acknowledges that he knows Elmer and informs Joe Sutton that Elmer is a school board member. Joe then tells Bob that Elmer is sitting in his outer office waiting to see him. Hobson appeared at the association's offices without an appointment and told the secretary that he wanted to talk to someone in authority. When asked why he wanted to meet with an official, he told the secretary that he was filing a complaint against Coach Yates [the head football coach at North Richmond County High School]."

"A complaint about what?" John asked.

"Joe Sutton didn't know at the time he called Bob because he had not yet talked to Elmer. After discovering that Elmer was a school board member, Joe told Bob he felt obliged to at least

listen to what he had to say. So he met with Elmer and called Bob again an hour later. Elmer alleges that Coach Yates violated state high school athletic association rules by allowing his team's starting quarterback to remain enrolled at the school even though his parents and siblings have moved to another state. This student is Jeb Boswell, and he is now living with the Yates family. Elmer demanded that the athletic association declare Boswell ineligible, and sanction Coach Yates and Principal Dailey."

"Are Elmer's accusations true?" John asked.

"The Boswell family moved out of the school district last June. However, Jeb's parents agreed to let him live with Coach Yates until he graduated from North Richmond High and they are paying Coach Yates \$200 a month for room and board. The parents believe this arrangement is in their son's best interest since it is likely he will receive an athletic scholarship to play college football. Therefore, it is true that Jeb has been living with the Yates family since last June."

"Is such an arrangement permissible by the athletic association rules? Is it in compliance with our district's policies?"

"Coach Yates had asked the athletic director at North Richmond to get a ruling from officials at the athletic association before agreeing to this arrangement. The athletic director has a letter from the state commissioner stating that the arrangement was acceptable, provided it was approved by the student's family and by the school principal. Principal Dailey and the parents assured Coach Yates in writing that they had no objections. As to school district policy, I could find nothing that addresses this issue. I don't believe there is precedent."

"So from the association's perspective, Elmer's complaint is invalid?" John asked.

"Yes, but there is more. We are a few weeks away from the state football tournament. North Richmond has a 7 and 1 record and is one of the favorites to win the championship in their division. Jeb Boswell is the quarterback and star of the team. Any guess who is the backup quarterback?"

John said he had no idea. "You have to remember, Matt, I don't live in the North Richmond area. I'm a South Richmond High booster [the other high school in the district]."

"The second-string quarterback is another senior, Ron Hobson, Elmer Hobson's grandson. Get the picture? Elmer has always felt that his grandson had not been given a fair chance to be the team's starting quarterback. Now that the team is having a successful season, Elmer may do almost anything to have his grandson assume the starting role in the state tournament. As a sidebar, Bob Dailey told me the grandson is a good student and probably is unaware of his grandfather's shenanigans."

John then commented, "I just remembered something. Last summer when we were approving contracts for driver education teachers, Elmer opposed your recommendation to extend a contract to Coach Yates. Elmer claimed that he had received complaints about Coach Yates being a poor instructor. Do you think that matter was connected to all of this?"

"Who knows," the superintendent answered. "With Elmer, everything is potentially connected. He votes against a lot of things. Going to the athletic association without informing the board or the administration, however, is an ethical matter. As a board member, he should have informed either you or me that he would be filing a complaint to the state athletic association. Had he done so, we would have had an opportunity to explain to him why his accusation is invalid. Besides, board members should not be dealing directly with the athletic association; that is an administrative responsibility."

"What did Joe Sutton from the athletic association do with Elmer's complaint?"

"Elmer demanded to know what would be done to adjudicate the matter. Joe Sutton explained that there was no violation, and he then showed him a copy of the letter the commissioner had written to North Richmond's athletic director last May. Elmer then stormed out of the office indicating that keeping this letter from the school board was additional evidence of a conspiracy involving several administrators and coaches."

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The school board member privately answered.

John pretty stubbornly asked about if you a pretty good mistake anything. The school board today if you

Problem

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“Matt, I have a suggestion. Let’s forget about this. Elmer is never going to behave as we would like him to behave and I can assure you, we aren’t going to change his behavior. On the bright side, few people take him seriously. Sure they are amused by his outrageous statements and actions, but basically, he’s a harmless pain in the neck. I believe voters keep electing him because he is amusing.”

The superintendent had a different opinion. “At the very least, we need to inform the other board members, and I believe that the board should reprimand him for what he did. That can be done privately and tactfully, but at least there will be a record indicating that his behavior was unacceptable.”

John replied, “I don’t know. A reprimand is likely to make him act out even more. He’s a pretty stubborn person. He loves getting his name in the paper and relishes conflict. Matt, how about if you talk to him privately? You’re experienced in dealing with these matters and you have a pretty good relationship with him. Maybe the best way to handle this is to tell him he made a mistake and to advise him that in the future, he should talk to you before he does this sort of thing. The other board members will support this course of action, I’m sure. In fact, I’ll call them today if you wish. That way, you can tell Elmer that you are speaking for all of us.”

Problem Framing

1. Assume you are the superintendent. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Do you agree that Elmer Hobson’s behavior was unethical? Why or why not?
2. John Mosure, the board president, first suggested that nothing should be done. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this course of action?
3. Mr. Mosure subsequently suggests that the superintendent talk to Hobson on behalf of the other board members. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this course of action?
4. Who is responsible for ensuring that board members act ethically?
5. In response to a question from the board president, Superintendent Karman indicated that there was no school district policy or precedent addressing the situation in question. Does the absence of district policy affect the decision made by the principal, athletic director, and coach? Why or why not?
6. Obtain a copy of the code of ethics for your state’s association of school boards. Determine whether the code addresses behavior pertinent to this case.
7. Do school board members have authority to act independently? What is the basis of your answer?
8. Do you agree with the superintendent that it is important to reprimand Hobson? Why or why not?
9. Does a superintendent have authority to regulate the behavior of school board members? What evidence do you have to support your answer?

Suggested Readings

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